

**UNVEILING OF A PLAQUE TO COMMEMORATE THE
50th ANNIVERSARY OF THE SINKING OF THE MV *BLYTHE STAR*
REMARKS BY
HER EXCELLENCY THE HONOURABLE BARBARA BAKER AC
GOVERNOR OF TASMANIA
CONSTITUTION DOCK, THURSDAY 19 OCTOBER 2023**

Good afternoon, everyone. I welcome you all to this unveiling of a plaque to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the loss of the MV *Blythe Star*, and three members of her crew.

I particularly welcome the last survivor of the *Blythe Star*, Mr Mick Doleman.

May we also acknowledge the legacy of maritime safety improvements that followed from that shipwreck.

I begin by paying my respects to the traditional and original owners of this land: the palawa people. I acknowledge the contemporary Tasmanian Aboriginal community and recognise their enduring culture and continued connection to land, sea, and waters.

As many of you may know, I was in Triabunna for the annual Seafarer's Memorial Service last weekend. There, at the request of the Organising Committee, I spoke briefly about the *Blythe Star* and the fact that its wreckage was found earlier this year.

Today, I would like to talk about that pivotal moment in Tasmania's maritime history in more detail, and its effects on significant advances in maritime safety. The sinking of the MV *Blythe Star* prompted important and continuous improvements in safety at sea.

The *Blythe Star* was a 44-metre steel coastal freighter, chartered by the Tasmanian Transport Commission to ship cargo to King Island.

According to the Australasian Underwater Cultural Heritage Database¹, the motor vessel *Blythe Star* sailed from Prince of Wales Bay, Hobart, for King Island in the late afternoon of 12 October 1973. She had a cargo of superphosphate fertiliser and a ton of beer in kegs. The *Blythe Star* had a crew of nine, under the command of Captain George Cruickshank. Captain Cruickshank made it clear that he intended to run the west coast. There was an incorrect report of a sighting of the ship off Flinders Island. This misled authorities into believing *Blythe Star* had taken the opposite course, which would have extended the passage by another day.

With the vessel well overdue, authorities then had the entire coastline to consider. Despite the most extensive air-sea search then conducted in Australia, no trace of the *Blythe Star* could be found. Flotsam, jetsam, and drifting oil slicks were all investigated. It was finally concluded that the *Blythe Star* had gone down off the far north-east coast. Apart from a few private searchers, who were convinced that the vessel had sunk off the west coast, official investigations ceased on 23 October.

What do we now know of this loss?

The *Blythe Star* started to list as early as 7.30 pm on the night before it sank. By 8.25 am, the ship had rolled to 45 degrees. The engineer had shut down the engine, after having gone below while water was entering the ship, from the submerged starboard deck and forward.

The lifeboats were not able to be launched due to the listing of the vessel. Some of the crew managed to release a life-raft, while others simply jumped into the water. Immediately afterwards, the vessel foundered about six miles due west of South West Cape in 150 metres of water.

All ten crewmembers made it into the life-raft alive. They saw high flying aircraft but could not attract their attention. Aboard the life-raft, they drifted about the southwest coast, in danger of being pushed offshore and into the Tasman Sea. Fortunately, a northerly current was encountered. Still, the life-raft floated around the south of Tasmania, and up and down the east coast, before finally coming ashore in Deep Glen Bay on the east coast.

¹ <https://www.environment.gov.au/shipwreck/public/wreck/wreck.do?key=6940> accessed 16 Oct 23

Second engineer, John Sloan, without tablets required for his medical condition, died while the life-raft was adrift. On the 21st October, chief engineer, John Eagles, died from the effects of the ordeal. Kenneth Jones died on the following day.

The remaining survivors were initially unable to scale the steep cliffs surrounding Deep Glen Bay. Eventually, Mick Doleman, and Alf Simpson and Mal McCarroll, managed to climb up the cliffs.

They then endured an arduous time moving through the thick bush. They found an old logging trail which they followed until about 2.30 pm on the 24th October. Thankfully, they were picked up by a logging contractor. A rescue operation was quickly organised for the men still at Deep Glen Bay. George Cruickshank, Stan Leary, Brenton Power and Cliff Langford were rescued. The bodies of Kenneth Jones and John Eagles were recovered. The survivors were admitted to the Royal Hobart Hospital for treatment.

The Maritime Operations Centre in Canberra and the Royal Australian Air Force had initiated a large-scale rescue operation, which was a testament to the nation's commitment to protecting lives at sea. While the search did not find the *Blythe Star* or her crew, the coordinated response efforts highlighted the importance of an effective maritime safety infrastructure.

In response to this catastrophe, Australia's maritime safety authorities took immediate action. Lessons learned from the MV *Blythe Star* tragedy led to comprehensive reviews of safety protocols, of navigation equipment, and of emergency response procedures. Requirements for daily position reporting and for electronic position beacons, both on board vessels and in life-rafts, have significantly enhanced the effectiveness of search and rescue missions.

The *Blythe Star* tragedy was a turning point in the maritime industry, and the reforms continue to save lives and prevent tragedies at sea today. The tragedy underscored the need for constant vigilance, review, and innovation.

As we remember this tragic event, we remember the men who were lost. We also acknowledge the response; the legacy of improved maritime safety.

In this year marking the 50th anniversary of the loss of the *Blythe Star*, we acknowledge that CSIRO Research Vessel, *Investigator*, was able to identify the wreck of the *Blythe Star* off the west coast of Tasmania. This closes the circle on the tragic events of October 1973. Hopefully, it gives some comfort and closure for those affected by the loss.

I shall now be joined by the last survivor of that last voyage, Mr Mick Doleman.

We shall now unveil the plaque commemorating the 50th anniversary of the loss of the MV *Blythe Star*.

Thank you.